

A SUPERINTENDENT'S FINAL ANNOUNCEMENT!*

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Abstract

Superintendent Gillet, lacking sensitivity to the environment of the school, allows issues to surface without resolving them within the context of the prevailing climate. He discovers the hard way that shared decision making, collaboration, and other participatory governance models should be implemented for resolving divergent issues. Rather than being adversarial, confrontational, and steadfast in his way of thinking, Superintendent Gillet should have turned to more cooperative and non-confrontational approaches. Communication from the superintendent was absent. Instead of using policies to defend his position, he should have involved people in shaping their positions.

Superintendent Gillet of the Bellaire School District (an urban school district with twenty-six thousand students that had undergone considerable controversy as a result of two elementary school closings last school year due to budgetary cuts) sat in his office realizing that the new school year was only a month away. Considering the intensity of the continual parent, student, and community complaints, Gillet thought that there was simply no way to enter the new school year without changes in the assignment of principals.

The closing of two Bellaire elementary schools, although upsetting to the community, was necessary for financial reasons. Bellaire School District's student enrollment had dropped by forty-five percent with students heading for private schools, academies, and rural school districts. The staffing in the Bellaire School District was significantly higher than other comparable school districts. In addition, the closing of the two elementary schools resulted in the integration of a more culturally diverse student population in each of the schools within the district. Among the students of the Bellaire School District, thirty percent were Caucasian, forty-five percent African-American, twenty percent Hispanic, and five percent Oriental. With little concern for public relations, Gillet based his reasons for closing two elementary schools chiefly on financial reasons.

Upon review of a memorandum from the Assistant Superintendent of Personnel received today stating the retirement of Penny Shcandt, Assistant Superintendent of Instruction, and a resignation of Verne Saser, the Assistant Principal at Yates Middle School; Gillet appeared to have a golden opportunity. He believed his expeditious decision making would be best to improve the district's effectiveness. After all, he thought "James Mittel, principal at Marshall High, is an excellent person to assume the role of Assistant Superintendent of Instruction. His instructional leadership has resulted in the highest state-wide test scores in the district and above the state average. Mittel has served successfully on numerous curricula committees. Filling this position with Mittel would mean the best of all worlds. It would add an excellent person to the central office team and, at the same time, provide the opportunity to reassign principals and enhance the academic climate in the school district."

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After calling the Assistant Superintendent of Personnel and acquiring the personnel files of all current principals and assistant principals, Superintendent Gillet began his master planning. He examined the strengths and weaknesses of all principals and compared their successes on all projects attempted. He reviewed parent, student, and teacher complaints of the previous year, looked at student achievement scores, weighed the discipline problems occurring in the various schools, and studied the attendance records of administrators, teachers, and students.

After completing his review, Gillet compiled a list of personnel changes to be made by the Assistant Superintendent of Instruction. Gillet did not seek board approval, as the board's policy stated "the superintendent has the authority to make personnel changes, under certain conditions, without Board approval." However, the "certain conditions" were never specified.

At the top of Gillet's instruction was "promote James Mittel from Principal of Marshall High to Assistant Superintendent of Instruction". Six principals were transferred from one school to another based upon Gillet's assessments of their strengths and weaknesses. At the bottom of Gillet's memorandum was the directive to the Assistant Superintendent of Personnel to inform and implement these changes effectively and immediately.

Three days after Superintendent Gillet announced the changes to the school district personnel and the general public, the number of complaints increased. On the fourth day, in a meeting with the Assistant Superintendent of Personnel, he discussed the complaints, some of which had been presented to him and others that were appearing in the local newspapers with all concerns centered on the transferring of principals without sufficient parental notification and community awareness.

Headlines of one of the newspapers read, "Board Trustee Disgruntled!" Evidently, one of Gillet's board of education members used the newspaper to publicly complain that the position of Assistant Superintendent of Instruction was not posted. Charles Hutchins, Assistant Principal of Williamsburg High (who happens to be African-American), complained that once again he had been passed over for promotion feeling he should have been appointed to high school principal. Gary Balkam, a teacher in the district and a longtime seeker of an administrative position, expressed concerns that the positions should have been posted. Shauna Harit (also African-American) was believed to have had at least two meetings with Charles Hutchins as he was attempting to get her to join him in filing a class action suit. Gillet was in a continual battle with the media as the newspapers were relentless.

Over the next several days, the local newspaper, which opposed the prior school year's school closings, printed articles concerning the superintendent's unfairness, the superintendent's annual evaluation, infighting, and poor superintendent communications. Newspaper headlines proclaimed "Superintendent's Evaluation Poor" and "Superintendent Loses Support of Some Board Members Over Ill Practices." In responding to the superintendent's evaluation, the article quoted a board member as saying, "The only area in which the superintendent's evaluation increased was sense of humor and the ability to laugh at personnel mistakes." Another article quoted still another board member as having said, "The superintendent should resign as he is incompetent." The board members that hired Gillet were not the same school board members at the present time due to election turnovers of board members. Four out of seven board members prompted his departure.

In his kind mannerism, Superintendent Gillet replied, "I will not dignify these charges by responding. Our school district policy gives me the right to make personnel changes, and I followed policy. As far as posting, the assignment of the principal's position was posted, and that is sufficient." Coincidence or not, the four board members confronting Gillet were African American, while their Caucasian superintendent had varying support on certain issues from his three other Caucasian board members.

Acrimonious relations continued over the next several weeks to say the least. Like a blazing fire, issues involving Superintendent Gillet raged through the community. As time passed, the conflict became more intense and pressure mounted. Debate continued until Superintendent Gillet announced his appointment as Superintendent to the Constane Public Schools, a neighboring school district.

1 The Reflective Analysis

Welcome to Reflective Analysis which is based on the all six ISLLC Standards and your readings of A Superintendent's Swan Song. It is intended to provoke your thoughtful reflection and discussion among colleagues and classmates. The Reflective Analysis provides opportunity for each learner to analyze issues, make comparisons, and apply theory to practice. It motivates the learner to search for evidence; thus increasing one's comprehension of the reading, examining one's convictions, and discovering each other's perspective. The ISLLC Standards follow:

ISLLC Standard 1

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

ISLLC Standard 2

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

ISLLC Standard 3

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.

ISLLC Standard 4

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

ISLLC Standard 5

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

ISLLC Standard 6

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

Reflective Thinking Questions

1. What effect did the political, social, and cultural aspects of the climate in the Bellaire School District have on the nature of the conflict that emerged? How did Gillet violate the letter and spirit of ISLLC Standard 6?
2. If it is true that policy permitted the superintendent to take the personnel action described, what other actions might have been necessary to avoid the conflict that emerged? Please base your answer on one or more of the ISLLC Standards.
3. What are some of the critical factors that must be considered in managing the type of conflict that has emerged in the Bellaire School District? Please use one or more of the ISLLC Standards to justify your answer.
4. What are some of the actions a superintendent might take when board members publicly make critical statements about his/her effectiveness? Base your response on the pertinent ISLLC Standard(s).
5. To what extent did the knowledge, disposition, and performance of the superintendent contribute to the conflict?

ADDRESSING THE ISSUES

Select the one best answer to the following questions. In essay format, explain your rationale for each of the answers that you select below. Integrate the ISLLC Standards into your responses where appropriate and applicable.

1. Having analyzed the conflict that occurred in the Bellaire School District, which of the following would you identify as the critical factor causing the conflict?

- a. Competition for scarce resources in a troubled district.
 - b. A desire for autonomy on behalf of the board of education and superintendent.
 - c. A divergence in goals between the board of education and superintendent.
 - d. All of the above.
2. Having diagnosed the conflict, in your judgment, which of the following approaches is least likely to be effective in minimizing the dysfunctional effects of the conflict?
- a. The superintendent should admit an error and keep a positive climate in the district by working collaboratively with the board of education to achieve the best solution.
 - b. The superintendent should hold firm to his positions; he is acting within policy, and after all, personnel actions are his responsibility. He cannot afford to allow the board of education to interfere in personnel matters.
 - c. Both the board and the superintendent have rights and responsibilities; the superintendent should meet with the board and talk through the matter in a give-and take manner, even if he loses face.
 - d. There is really no need for additional action; the decision has been made, and the superintendent should just wait and see what happens.
3. Which of the following strategies should Superintendent Gillet use to avoid the possibility of board members developing feelings of resentment?
- a. Refrain from making any comments that seem to hold a negative connotation and simply state the purpose of his decision. Ask for clarification as to how the board would like future personnel actions to be handled.
 - b. Take no action and just hold his positions.
 - c. Retract the personnel actions and start again, keeping the same objectives in mind.
 - d. None of the above.
4. The comments that people are making in the newspaper can best be characterized as:
- a. Important and must be taken by the superintendent as critical factors that have an influence on his stability in the district.
 - b. Antagonistic comments made by individuals who believe the superintendent acted in an unfair and unjust manner.
 - c. Comments individuals are making in an effort to create equity in the system.
 - d. All of the above.
5. When Superintendent Gillet said, "I will not speak to these charges..." he exemplified:
- a. is not sensitive to the intensity of the situation.
 - b. an individual who is reluctant to create interpersonal conflict.
 - c. an individual who stands on principle and holds expectations for himself as superintendent of the district.
 - d. none of the above.